

# **The Apostolicity of the Church The Successors of the Apostles**

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***“We believe that the Church retains her hierarchy – because this is what we are required to believe.”***

## **Is the Catholic Church still apostolic?**

Many Catholics today hold that Francis and his recent predecessors have not been true successors of St Peter – or at least have only doubtfully been so.

In this series I shall consider whether the illegitimacy of their claims to the papacy would necessarily entail either the disappearance of the Church’s hierarchy as a whole, or a radical change in how we are to understand the nature of this hierarchy.

My contention is that these ideas do not entail denying the continuing existence of the hierarchy; nor would the illegitimacy of Francis et al. entail this conclusion.

Let’s look closer at the objection. One way of expressing it runs as follows.

### **The objection itself**

1. Pius XII states in *Mystici Corporis*, “the ordinary power of jurisdiction” is “receive[d] directly from the same Supreme Pontiff.”[\[1\]](#)
2. If Francis etc. have not been true popes, then there has been no pope from whom anyone can directly receive ordinary jurisdiction for around sixty years.

3. Therefore, if Francis etc. have not been true popes, then there are no more bishops with ordinary jurisdiction.
4. But only bishops with ordinary jurisdiction are successors of the apostles in the proper sense.[\[2\]](#)
5. Therefore there would be no more successors of the apostles in the proper sense.
6. But if there are no more successors of the apostles in the proper sense, then the Church would no longer be apostolic, and thus would have defected.
7. Christ willed that “there should be shepherds and teachers until the end of time”[\[3\]](#) – and if there are no more successors of the apostles in the proper sense, then the Church would have defected.
8. But the Church cannot defect. Therefore Francis etc. have been true popes.

(For the sake of clarity, I do not accept the formulation of n. 2, and thus deny the conclusion given in the second half of n. 8.

Whilst I otherwise accept the logic, I also deny the conclusions of nn. 3 and 5.

I accept the principles expressed in nn. 4, 6-7 and the first sentence of n. 8.)

### **Various responses**

There are many opposing parties, with opposing conclusions, that assert that the vacancy of the Holy See entails the end of ordinary jurisdiction.

Some, of course, assert this as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, as a means of proving that Francis et al. have

been true popes.

Some who reject the claims of Francis et al. believe that there are no more bishops with ordinary jurisdiction.

Some hold that “the traditional clergy” now constitute the only true successors of the apostles today.

Others directly state that there are no more living successors of the apostles. They admit that most authors and theologians in the past held that it would be impossible for the entire hierarchy to defect from the faith, and yet believe that “we can see” that God has permitted this to happen, and must rethink things accordingly.

However, we do not accept that “we can see” that God has permitted this. What we can see is what he has permitted in our immediate environs, and in those parts of the world of which we have knowledge through modern technology. But it seems gratuitous to suggest that we have such an exhaustive view of the world as to be able to assert that the entire hierarchy has defected.

On the contrary, we must believe that the Church is indefectible, hierarchical and apostolic, and that this must entail actual successors of the apostles living today. We believe this, even if it is difficult to verify aspects of these points in the concrete. We should not be inclined to assert that the hierarchy has disappeared just because we and enormous swathes of the earth do not have access to such remaining successors. Such a conclusion simply does not follow.

For this reason, we believe that the Church retains her hierarchy – because this is what we are required to believe.

In order to understand this, let’s first define some key terms.

### **Apostolicity**

The theologian [Salaverri](#) writes:

**“Apostolicity is a necessary property of the Church.**

“Definition of terms. Apostolicity fundamentally is the perennial identity in the Church of the mission, which Christ gave the Apostles when he instituted the Church. Apostolicity usually is distinguished into at least three forms:

1. Of origin [...]
2. Of doctrine [...]
3. Of succession, which is the juridical identity of the power of teaching, sanctifying and ruling of the contemporary Church with the ordinary power of the Apostles handed on by a legitimate succession.”[\[4\]](#)

“Succession” is “the continuation of one person after another in some office.”[\[5\]](#) Salaverri explains the difference between a “formal succession” and one which is merely “material.”

“A twofold *succession* should be distinguished, one material and the other formal:

“a) *Material succession* is a mere temporal continuation of one person after another in some office,

“b) *Formal succession* is the full substitution of one person in the rights and obligations of an office for someone else, or it is the substitution of a subject without any change of right in a certain office.”[\[6\]](#)

Of these two types, he states that formal succession – and not merely material succession – is what constitutes the property of apostolicity:

“*Apostolicity of formal succession* is, therefore, that apostolicity of succession defined previously under 3); this will be *direct*, if by an uninterrupted succession it goes back to a certain Apostle, the first pastor of the same

Church; but it will be *indirect*, if the first in the series of successors properly received his jurisdiction from the pastor of another Church, who can legitimately confer it.”[7]

He also explains why it is that formal apostolic succession is a necessary and perpetual property of the Church:

**“The apostolicity of formal succession is proved**, in which others are included.

“A. What Christ instituted perpetually in the Church is its necessary property. But Christ instituted perpetually the juridical identity of the power of the Church of all ages with the ordinary power of the Apostles, to be handed on by a formal succession. *Therefore the apostolicity of formal succession is a necessary property of the Church.* [Emphasis added]

“The minor is explained: 2) The identical power of the Apostles is to be handed on perpetually by formal succession, because perpetuity is promised by Christ to the same Apostles: Matt. 28:20; John 14:16; but not to the same persons physically; therefore to the same ones morally or juridically, that is, without any change of law, or by formal succession.

“B. St. Irenaeus and Tertullian say that formal succession from the Apostles is a distinctive property of the Church; therefore it is also necessary. The antecedent was already proved in thesis 8 on the successors of the Apostles.”[8]

### **Who are the successors of the apostles?**

#### **Canon 329:**

§ 1. Bishops are successors of the Apostles and by divine institution are placed over specific churches that they govern with ordinary

power under the authority of the Roman Pontiff.

Does this apply to all bishops – including retired bishops, auxiliary or titular bishops, and even to schismatic and heretical bishops? Could it apply to the bishops consecrated following Vatican II to care for the various “traditional” groups – who themselves explicitly deny that they hold any ordinary jurisdiction over specific (or “particular”) churches?

[Bouscaren and Ellis](#) answer in the negative, and explain Canon 329 further:

“What is here said of Bishops *applies only to resident Bishops*, that is, those who are ‘placed over particular churches which they govern.’

“The Code is here treating principally of the power of government or jurisdiction; only incidentally is mention made of titular Bishops, who have the episcopal character and the power of order, but *per se* no jurisdiction. These canons do not apply to them unless they are specifically mentioned.”[\[9\]](#) (Emphasis added)

[Salaverri](#) also addresses this question:

“*Bishops* are those men in the Church who have sacred power that is full in its own nature. They can be either titular or residential.

“*Titular Bishops* are those who have only the ordinary power of Orders. *Residential Bishops* are the heads of the particular Churches, who have the ordinary office of ruling a certain flock of the faithful, with the full power of its own nature of teaching, sanctifying and governing.

“Residential Bishops are said to be the *successors of the Apostles*, as is clear from thesis 8.”[\[10\]](#)

His “thesis 8” – and the accompanying title of the article in which it falls – gives us further definition:

**“BISHOPS ARE SUCCESSORS OF THE APOSTLES.**

**“Thesis 8. Bishops by divine right succeed the Apostles in their ordinary office; each one of them presides over one particular Church. [...]**

“A Bishop in our thesis is understood as a man who *in a particular Church has the complete ordinary power of teaching, sanctifying and governing*. Therefore, the power of the Bishop is not merely delegated or extraordinary or vicarious coming from some other human person, although it is the power of a Bishop ‘placed under the due authority of the Roman Pontiff,’ who not in his own name, ‘but in the name of Christ feeds and governs his flock.”[\[11\]](#) (Emphasis added)

This is a commonplace. In other words: diocesan ordinaries (or their equivalents) are the successors of the apostles properly speaking – and other bishops are not. [\[12\]](#) This is because they alone succeed to the full pastoral office of the apostles, namely that of teaching, sanctifying and governing subjects proper to them.

As the passage above suggests, the acceptance or approval “by the authority of the Roman Pontiff” – which [Van Noort](#) calls the “adoption or assumption into the corporate body of the pastors of the Church” – is a key means by which a formal succession differs from a merely material succession, and is crucial for the attainment of the power of jurisdiction.[\[13\]](#) A merely material succession, without such adoption and approval, is insufficient to establish someone as a successor of the apostles – which is why it is improper and misleading to say that the various Eastern Orthodox bodies enjoy apostolic succession.

The idea of a merely material succession – whether with some appearance of legality or otherwise – is useful for

describing a certain social reality, and it is important in establishing apostolicity as a mark of the Church. However, it is ultimately *no succession* in the proper sense. Just as a material sin is not a sin, and just as a potential statue is not a statue, so too a merely material succession is no succession at all, and a merely potential successor of the apostles is no successor at all.

### **Can the Church lose apostolic succession?**

If formal apostolic succession is a necessary property of the Church, then it cannot be lost. Because of the above, we can see that such a loss would constitute the loss of apostolic succession itself, and would constitute a defection of the Church.

In his account of the different roles in the Church, St Paul writes:

“And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and other some evangelists, and other some pastors and doctors: For the perfecting of the saints, for the word of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ.” (Eph. 4.11-13)

Vatican I takes up this teaching:

“[J]ust as [Christ] sent apostles, whom he chose out of the world, even as he had been sent by the Father, in like manner it was his will that in his church there should be shepherds and teachers until the end of time.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Similarly, [St Robert Bellarmine](#) explains it further:

“In no way can the Church exist without shepherds and bishops, as St. Cyprian rightly teaches, the Church is the people united to the bishop, and the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop. [...]”



“This is certainly proved from St. Paul: [Eph. 4:11 etc]. Where he teaches apostles, he means the pastors who were going to exist in the Church even to the day of judgment.”[\[15\]](#)

“In no way” does not mean “in some way.” Elsewhere, Bellarmine also teaches:

“If all Bishops would err, the whole Church would also err, because the people are held to follow their own pastors, by what the Lord says in Luke, ‘He who hears you, hears me,’ and ‘Whatsoever they say, do.’”[\[16\]](#)

Naturally, this refers to erring in matters of faith – and matters of faith properly speaking, not just in matters pertaining to religion.

As stated, a merely material succession is no succession in the relevant sense, just as a mere potential to reclaim jurisdiction is not jurisdiction itself. The continuing existence of the hierarchy is not safeguarded by saying that it can cease to exist in act whilst lapsing into mere potency.

In any case, we know that the Church is indefectible. This means, among other things, that we can know with certainty that the Church cannot lose actual and formal apostolic succession altogether. Furthermore, if she *cannot* lose such apostolic succession, then we also know that she *has not* lost this succession – even if we have to rely solely on faith in this matter.

### **Two corollaries**

First, this essay is about apostolic succession and the perpetuity of the hierarchy. It is not entering into discussion of the so-called “cassiciacum thesis” of Bishop Guérard des Lauriers.

This theory attributes significance to the fact that Francis et al. enjoy a certain merely material succession to the papacy. Some of its proponents do use the idea of a

“material hierarchy” as a means of arguing for their ideas – but the central ideas relate to the papacy, and are not dependent on either the continuity or disappearance of the hierarchy. As an aside, Fr Hervé Belmont (who adheres to the cassiciacum theory) claims that the idea of a “material hierarchy” is a later accretion to the discourse, and states that he does not accept it (although for different reasons to those we have expressed here).

[\[17\]](#)

Asserting the necessary continuity of the hierarchy may undermine certain arguments for or interpretations of the cassiciacum theory, without undermining the theory itself. While I do not accept this theory, its central ideas do not exclude the continuity of the hierarchy in act – nor do they depend on its universal non-continuity. As such this essay is not intended as a critique of this theory.

Second, the points expressed are by no means an appeal to an invisible church or to invisible bishops, nor an appeal to mystery in the objective sense. Something may be a mystery and wholly unsolvable to us, whilst nonetheless being clear to others. We are stating that there must be legitimate bishops who continue to teach, rule and sanctify flocks proper to them – such men can hardly be invisible or a mystery to those flocks.

But *why* is this so? We know that the papacy continues in spite of interregna – why might this not also apply to the hierarchy as a whole?

### **Why the hierarchy must be perpetual**

[Scheeben](#) explains more about why the complete defection or disappearance of the apostolic hierarchy would be impossible:

“The indefectibility of the Church and of truth in the Church of course presupposes the indefectibility of the teaching body itself and of its activity. This however takes essentially different forms in the head and in the totality of the members of the teaching body.

“The person who at a given moment is head of the teaching body can die, without any cessation of the continued operation of the

authority of the head, and thus without the interruption of the continued existence of the uniform law of faith, and without it becoming impossible for the authority to be transferred to another person.

“The totality of the bishops, however, cannot die without thereby suspending their specific operation as authentic witnesses of the truth and making impossible any further succession in their function.

“Likewise it is possible, notwithstanding the continuing operation of his authority, that the pope *extra iudicium* [i.e. not *ex cathedra*] should profess, teach, or attest something false or heretical; on the contrary it is incompatible with the permanent authenticity of the aggregate episcopal testimony that all the bishops should attest, teach, or profess something false or heretical, even *extra iudicium* [informally].”[\[18\]](#)

There follows this section a rather complicated summary, which is simplified in the adaptation of this work produced by [Wilhelm and Scannell](#):

“The Infallibility and Indefectibility of the Church and of the Faith require on the part of the Head, that by means of his legislative and judicial power the law of Faith should be always infallibly proposed ; but this does not require the infallibility and indefectibility of his own interior Faith and of his extrajudicial utterances.

“On the part of the Teaching Body as a whole, there is directly required merely that it should not fail collectively, which, of course, supposes that it does not err universally in its internal Faith.”[\[19\]](#)

It should be clear – as expressed in Scheeben’s original, as well as elsewhere – that the death, defection from the faith or imposition of a false religion on the part of all the successors of the apostles constitutes a disappearance in

the sense discussed, and is impossible.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

We could multiply texts showing that the Church's hierarchy must continue, formally and in act, until the end of the world – but there is no need to do so.

Those who believe that Francis is the pope already accept the idea; and those who believe that the hierarchy has disappeared or lapsed into potency have already explicitly conceded that most authors and theologians in the past considered such a disappearance to be impossible.

The theologians cited show the truth of the conditional sixth and seventh points in the objection given above – that if there are no more successors of the apostles in the proper sense, then the Church is no longer apostolic and thus has defected. But this is impossible; therefore there must remain such men in the world.

Having established these points, we can now consider how successors of the apostles may remain in the world, even if there were to be no Roman Pontiff to appoint or approve them personally. To do this, we need to consider some fundamental points, such as the definitions of offices and of jurisdiction itself.

This shall be the subject of the next part.

### **Further Reading:**

[Learning Sacred Theology II](#): Ecclesiology, Dogmatic Theology and Apologetics

[Pope Leo XIII](#) – On the Duties of Laymen to Study and Spread the Faith

[A Note for Confused Catholics](#) – Apologetics and Dogmatic Theology

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[1] Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 1943,

n. 42 available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html)

[2] This is the point to be established in this piece. Cf. Salaverri: “Residential Bishops are said to be the *successors of the Apostles*, as is clear from thesis 8.” Joachim Salaverri, [‘On the Church of Christ,’ in Sacrae Theologia Summa IB](#) trans. Kenneth Baker SJ , Keep the Faith, 2015, n. 542.

[3] Vatican I, Pastor aeternus Session 4, 1870 no. 3. Available at: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>

[4] Salaverri n. 1176

[5] Salaverri n. 334

[6] Salaverri n. 334

[7] Salaverri n. 1178

[8] Salaverri nn. 1180-1

[9] Bouscaren and Ellis, Canon Law – A Text and Commentary. The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1963, p 177.

[10] Salaverri n. 542

[11] Salaverri Art. II, Th. 8, and n. 335

[12] C.f also Berry: “In the strict sense of the term, the successors of the Apostles are those in the Church, who obtain by *right of succession* the *full* powers of Orders and jurisdiction enjoyed by the Apostles.”

E. Sylvester Berry, [The Church of Christ](#), 1955 version, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 2009, p 157.

[13] “To be able to [function as pastors of their dioceses and to exercise jurisdiction there], we state, they must be adopted by the authority of the supreme pontiff. Adoption (assumptio) is a short form standing for “adoption or assumption into the corporate body of the pastors of the Church.” [...]

“We use the phrase, “by the authority of the pope,” to indicate that a direct, personal intervention by the pope is not necessarily

required. So long as the adoption be done by someone to whom the pope has entrusted the task (regardless of the precise way in which the pope commissions him to do so), or in accord with regulations already established or approved by the pope.

“In saying that papal adoption is necessary, we do not mean it is merely necessary because of ecclesiastical law currently in force; we mean it is necessary by the divine law itself.”

Van Noort, ‘Christ’s Church,’ Dogmatic Theology Vol. II, trans. Castelot and Murphy, The Newman Press, Westminster Maryland, 1957, n. 200.

[14] Vatican I, Pastor aeternus Session 4, 1870 no. 3. Available at: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>

[15] St Robert Bellarmine, On the Church Militant, trans. Ryan Grant, Mediatrix Press, Post Falls, ID, 2017, p 388

[16] Bellarmine 325

[17] Cf. the following, translated via DeepL:

The second development which I resist is later, and moreover I do not know to whom it should be attributed. It is the assertion that not only are we in the presence of a pope *materialiter tantum*, but that we would be in the presence, in Rome and in all the dioceses of Christendom, of a whole hierarchy *materialiter*, from the bishops and cardinals almost to the sacristans.

This also seems to me to be wrong for the following two imperative reasons:

1. For the apostolicity of the Catholic Church considered under the aspect of continuity, only the succession of the Apostolic See matters. The permanence of each of the other sees is not indispensable: there is no necessity of faith (and therefore no adequacy to reality) to assert a *materialiter* about

them;

2. The appointments of cardinals and bishops are acts of papal jurisdiction, which is precisely absent and which nothing can replace – whereas the appointment of the Supreme Pontiff is not an act of jurisdiction at all, which makes the question of the Roman See radically different from that of particular Sees or the Sacred College.

Fr Hervé Belmont, taken from [“The ‘Cassiciacum Thesis’”](#). For the sake of clarity, while we agree that apostolic succession could, in certain senses, be said to depend only on the continuity of the Apostolic See, we do not agree that it follows that the entire hierarchy could therefore disappear or lapse into potency, leaving no living successors of the apostles on earth.

[18] Matthias J. Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics, Book One (Theological Epistemology), Part One (The Objective Principles of Theological Knowledge)*, originally published 1873-87, trans. Michael J. Miller, Emmaus Academic, Steubenville, Ohio, 2019, §14 n. 188. Cf. also the adaptation made by Wilhelm and Scannell, with a preface by Cardinal Manning, which renders these paragraphs thus:

“The Indefectibility of the Teaching Body is at the same time a condition and a consequence of the Indefectibility of the Church. A distinction must, however, be drawn between the Indefectibility of the Head and the Indefectibility of the subordinate members. The individual who is the Head may die, but the authority of the Head does not die with him—it is transmitted to his successor.

“On the other hand, the Teaching Body as a whole could not die or fail without irreparably destroying the continuity of authentic testimony.

“Again, the Pope’s authority would not be injured if, when not exercising it (extra

judicium), he professed a false doctrine, whereas the authenticity of the episcopal testimony would be destroyed if under any circumstances the whole body fell into heresy.”

Joseph Wilhelm and T.B. Scannell, *A Manual of Catholic theology*; based on Scheeben’s “Dogmatik,” Vol. I, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, London, 1909, pp 45. Available from Os Justi Press.

[\[19\]](#) Wilhelm and Scannell, 46.